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Bilingualism and Autism: Exploring parents' attitudes and experiences

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Background

- Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is associated with language and communication difficulties including delay in language onset in early childhood [1].
- The very limited body of existing literature suggests no harmful linguistic effects of bilingualism for children with ASD [2].
- Despite this, parents can have concerns that bilingualism would amplify existing language delays [3].
- However, several areas have been identified as challenging for those with ASD yet potentially enhanced amongst bilinguals, including skills such as theory of mind and executive functioning [4]. Bilingualism has also been associated with the facilitation of community integration, family coherence and well-being [5].
- Research into the implications of bilingualism for those with ASD, however, is scarce, meaning families and practitioners have little information to assist them in their decision making.

This study explores how bilingual parents in the UK decide on what language practices to adopt for their child with ASD and identifies variables for future empirical study.

Methods

- Semi-structured interviews concerning the experience of raising a child in a bilingual household were conducted with bilingual parents with a child with ASD (n=17), and a group of bilingual parents with a typically developing child (n=18).
- Children were aged between 3-10 years (mean= 6.6 years)
- Parents spoke a wide variety of languages.
- Groups were matched on a number of variables including: age and gender of the child, as well as parent's ethnicity, length of time in the UK, educational level and language acquisition history.
- Interviews were analysed using thematic analysis.

Results: Language exposure

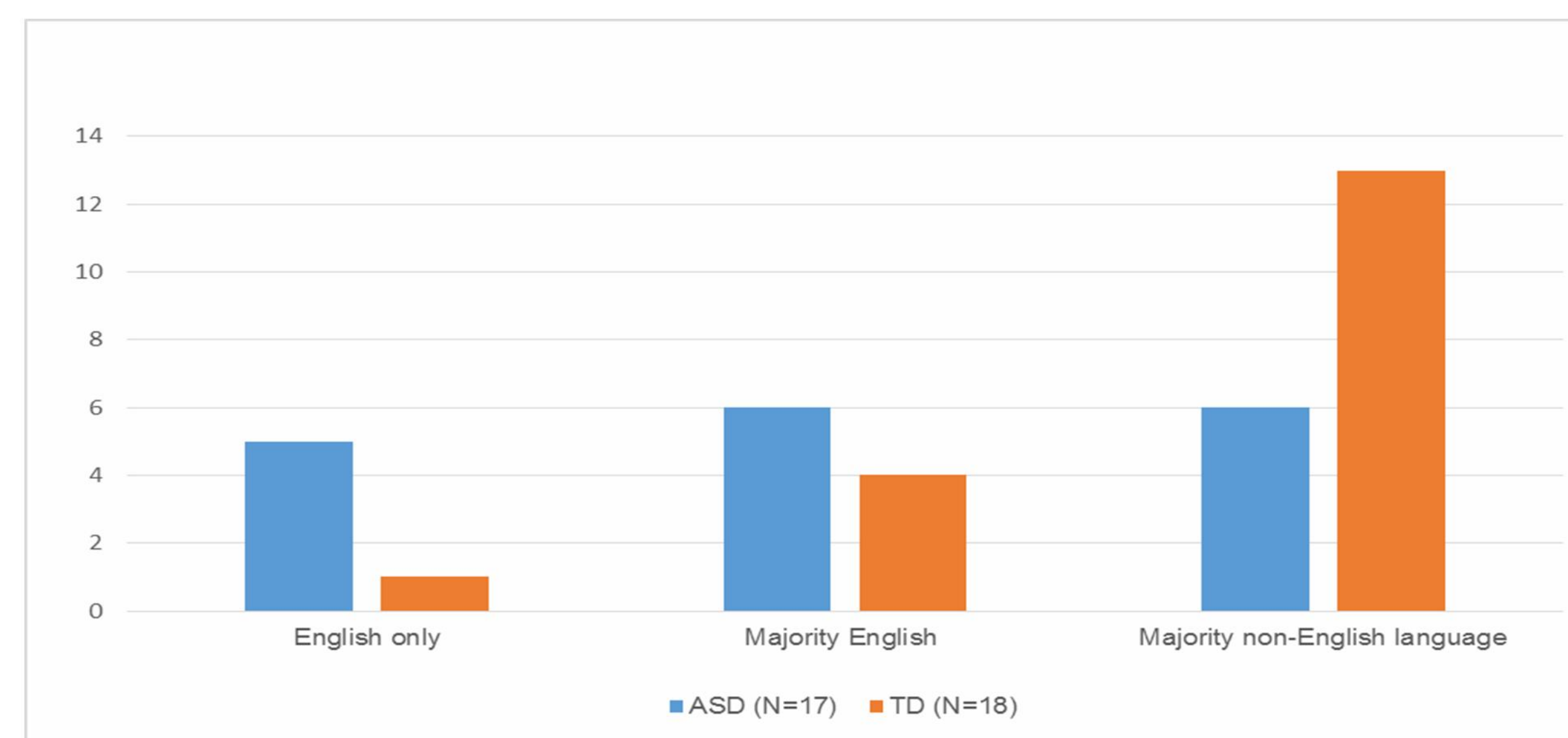
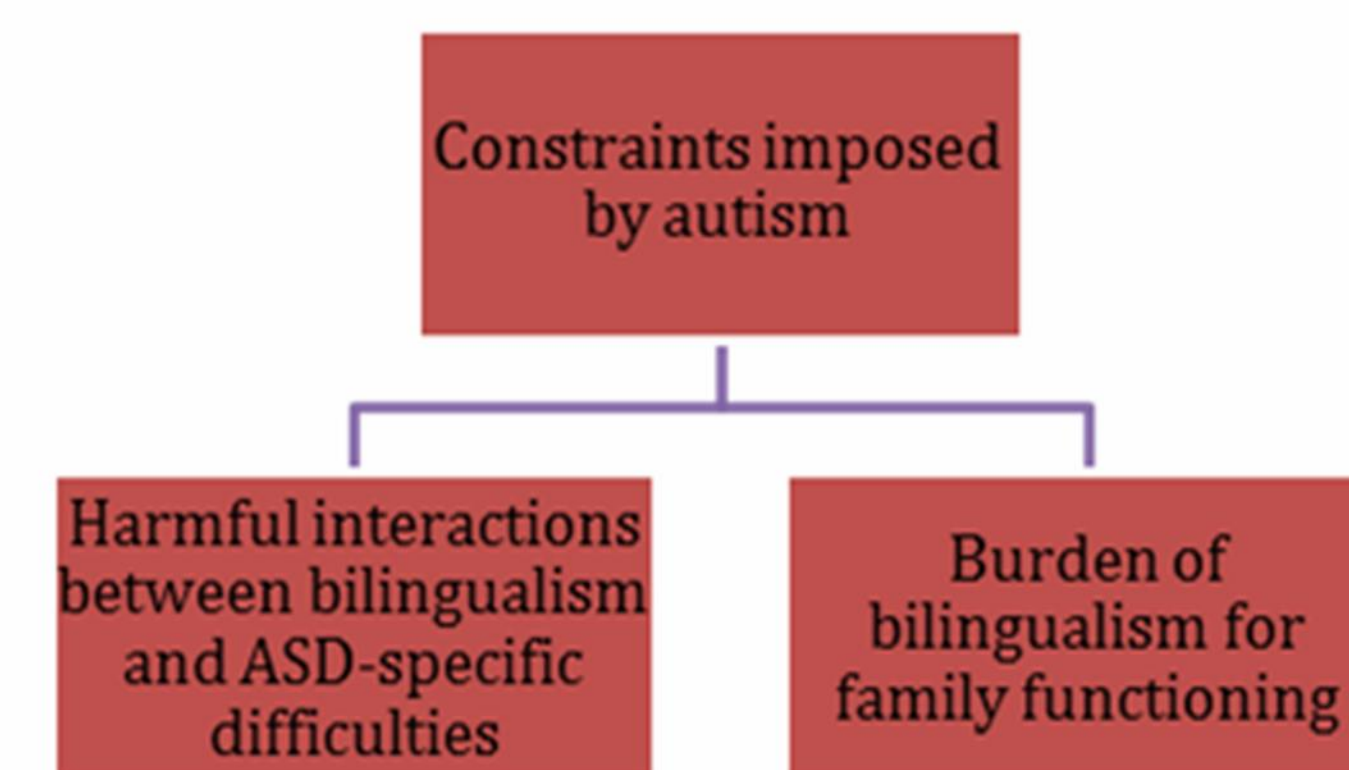


Figure 1: Language parents use to communicate with their child for both groups.

Parents of children with out ASD were more likely to raise their child bilinally than parents of children with ASD.

Results: Parents' perspectives

ASD-specific theme and subthemes:



Shared subthemes expressed differently:

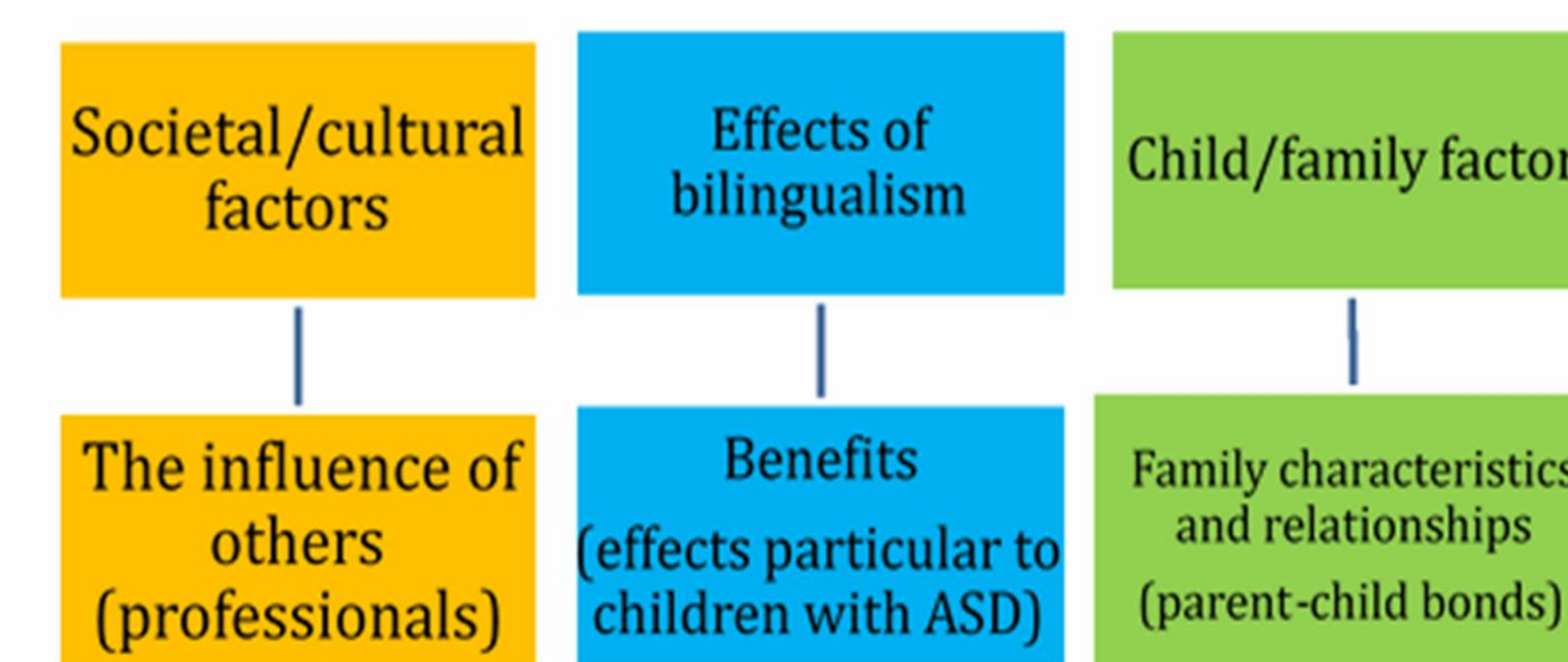


Figure 2: Results of thematic analysis: experiences unique to parents of children with ASD

- There were areas of overlap between parents of children with and without ASD, including issues surrounding child characteristics, family dynamics, and preserving heritage.
- However **some topics were specific to parents of children with ASD**.
- First**, parents felt that a bilingual environment would hinder their child's linguistic development, causing confusion and exacerbating delays. This concern was most prominent for parents of children of lower language ability (see Figure 3).
- Second**, parents felt bilingualism would be very challenging for the family. A lack of availability of resources for early years support in multiple languages contributed to this.
- Third**, some parents were advised by professionals to speak only one language and some were advised to speak both languages. Parents' views were sometimes in conflict with the advice given.
- Fourth**, parents identified a number of ways in which they felt bilingualism could provide social and cognitive benefits, particularly in flexible thinking and communication skills.
- Finally**, parents felt less linguistically restricted when interacting in their native language and felt that this language facilitated a strong emotional bond with their child.

Results: The role of verbal ability

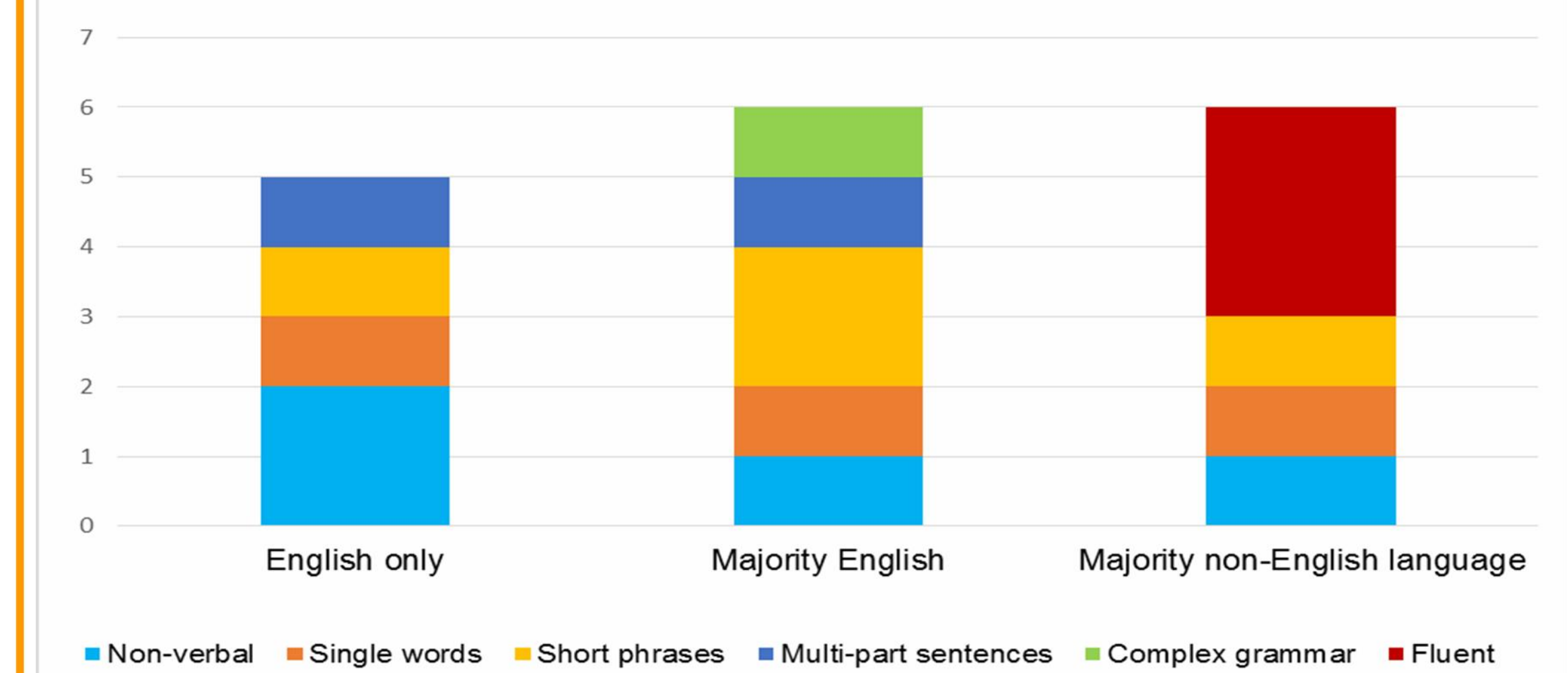


Figure 3: Language exposure and English proficiency for the ASD group

Parents of children with lower verbal ability were more likely to provide an English-only environment.

Conclusions

- Parents have concerns about bilingualism and these concerns are amplified for parents of children with lower verbal ability.
- Bilingualism may ensure high quality linguistic and social input for children with ASD, as well as having a positive effect on family relationships.
- It is essential to build a greater evidence base to enhance family decision-making in this area.
- Our findings point to the importance of considering not just cognitive consequences of bilingualism, but also family coherence and community integration, in future research in this field.